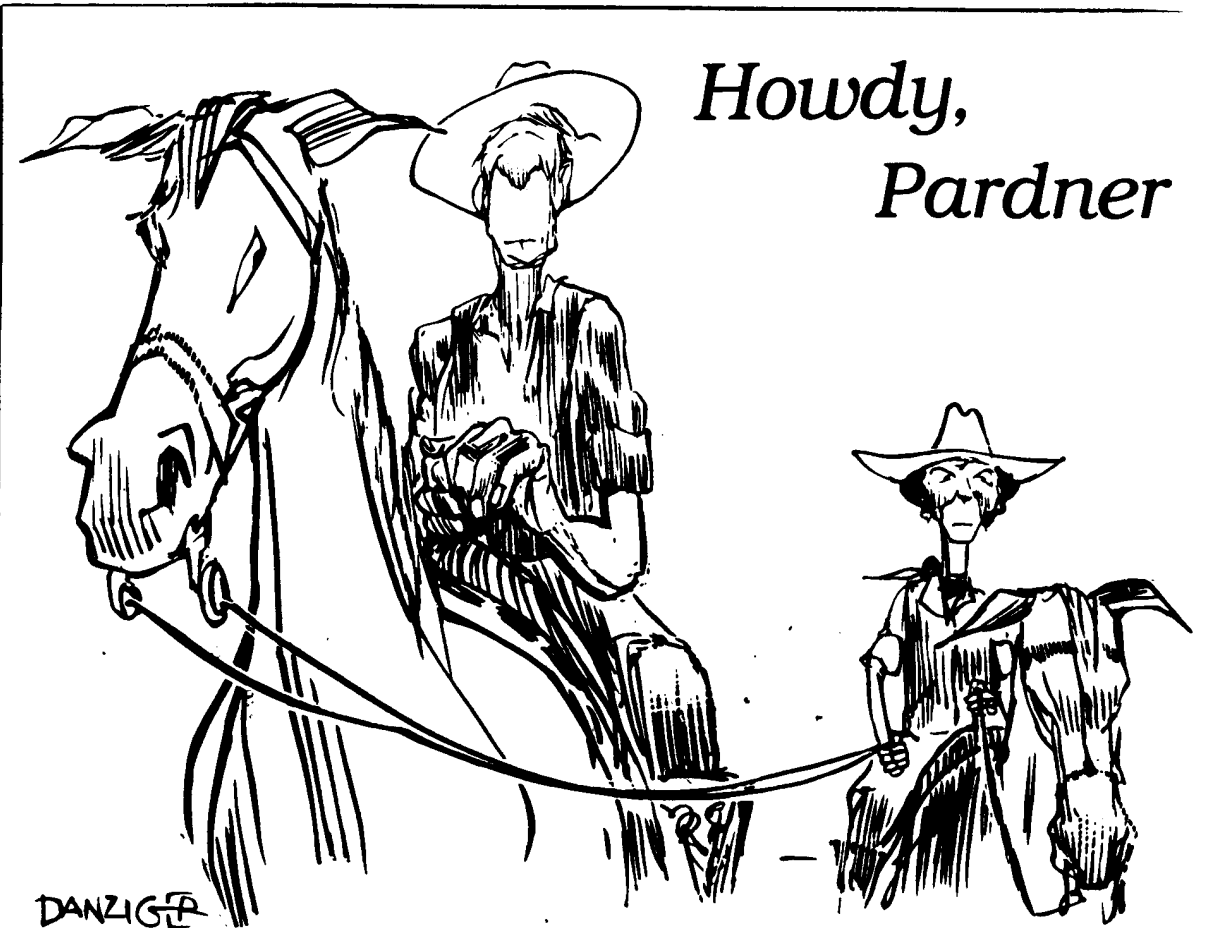


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SEXISM TURNS UP in many ways in our society. One of its current forms is the series of attacks on Nancy Reagan as a kind of usurper. Even those who think

By Garry Wills

that the insufferable Donald Regan should have gone — indeed, gone long ago — profess apprehensions about the way he went, propelled by a woman.

Mrs. Reagan, we are told, is unelected. So was Don Regan. She is a strong wife. Good. I have a strong wife, too. I think everyone should. It is said she is acting for her husband, becoming the real president, a kind of Edith Wilson. That is nonsense. The wonder is that it took her three months to get rid of Mr. Regan, not that she finally did.

We saw the same covert sexism at work when people noted that Rosalynn Carter was a strong wife. The implication was that she had not stayed in her place — or, conversely, that her husband was letting her get "uppity." Some commentators have started calling Mr. Reagan "henpecked."

The tacit assumption here is that any truly manly husband will not take his wife's advice — that is a sign of his own weakness, a violation of the natural order of things.

Any president has unofficial advisers, unelected, for whose actions he is responsible. Mr. Reagan has had a spectacular collection of bad advisers — all of them male. Advisers such as Robert McFarlane, William Casey, John Poindexter.

These men had places on the government's organization chart. So did Robert Kennedy when he was attorney general. His advice to John Kennedy — during the missile crisis and

at other times — went beyond his office, and was that of a brother. Dwight Eisenhower had a similar close counselor in his brother, Milton. It was not considered a sign of weakness for Mr. Eisenhower to listen to his brother. Milton was a man.

The partnership of Nancy and Ronald Reagan has always been extraordinarily close; but this is not a Svengali relationship, in either direction. His wife is Mr. Reagan's fellow trouper from acting days, one particularly sensitive to the needs of a performer, one who helps get him "up" for the appearances he does best.

Insofar as her prompting goes beyond that function, Nancy Reagan seems to have given her husband very sound advice — not only about dumping the boorish Donald Regan, but about thinking of arms control and peace as a legacy of the Reagan presidency. On that score, anyway, more power to her.